

ERADICATING POLIO

By Paula J. Dobriansky and Timothy E. Wirth*

Many Americans vividly remember the polio epidemics of the 1950s, when fear of the crippling virus closed schools and swimming pools across the country. The last case caused by a wild polio virus in the United States occurred in the late 1970s, however, and the disease that once alarmed Americans no longer causes much concern in this or most other countries, thanks to advances in medicine and concerted global efforts to eradicate it. Yet, polio remains endemic in four countries -- Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan.

The populations affected by polio today are among the poorest and most difficult to reach with vaccinations and information. Against these challenges, the world's resolve to eradicate polio once and for all may be weakening. And worse, some of the remaining polio-afflicted areas are exporting the disease to countries where it had been eliminated, threatening to turn back the progress we have made.

It is time for the international community to finish the job of eradicating polio. To do that requires strengthened commitment, enhanced cooperation and community involvement. The United States, through a bipartisan effort from both the government and private organizations, is vigorously pursuing all three.

It has been 18 years since the launch of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, a bold, innovative public-private effort to eradicate polio that was catalyzed by Rotary International. The initiative has grown into one of the largest public-health endeavors in history, with the involvement of national governments, international agencies such as the World Health Organization and the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), private corporations, foundations and nongovernmental organizations. Rotary International has continued its key role, and has provided hundreds of millions of dollars. The U.N. Foundation is actively engaged in trying to ensure that all financial resources are in place to eliminate polio, and has also contributed many millions of dollars of its own funds to the cause. The eradication campaign has made remarkable progress, immunizing 2 billion children around the world. The number of new polio cases worldwide has dropped from an estimated 350,000 per year in 1988 to less than 2,000 per year in 2005.

But to eradicate polio completely, we must strengthen our commitment to the task, and counteract any fatigue among private donors and governments. The United States is working through the G-8 and other forums to ensure the support of world leaders and address the \$50 million funding gap this year, and the even bigger projected shortfall for 2007-2008. U.S. government financial backing remains strong; we have contributed \$132 million for polio efforts this year and have provided over \$1.1 billion to the GPEI since its launch.

We must also bolster international cooperation to reach many of the children most at risk of the dreaded disease. In parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the international community is working to provide heroic public-health workers access to villages so they can vaccinate children, sometimes in conflict conditions. In the past, UN-sponsored "days of tranquility" in several war-torn countries allowed scheduled immunizations to proceed. Creative solutions will continue to be necessary to ensure health workers' access to conflict-affected areas.

Finally, we must enhance community involvement in countries where polio is still endemic. Local political and religious figures have a crucial role to play in disseminating helpful information, dispelling myths and instilling confidence in communities regarding immunization. National and world leaders, both secular and religious, must reach out to the communities affected by polio and urge local leaders to support vaccination efforts.

We have never been closer to eradicating polio around the world. Achieving that goal requires the efforts of not only public-health practitioners, but also diplomats, politicians and nongovernmental organizations. Let us work together to finish the task and save all children from this terrible disease.

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Note: *A Bangla translation of this article is also available from the American Center. If you are interested in the translation, please call the American Center Press Section (Tel: 8837150-4, Fax: 9885688; e-mail: DhakaPA@state.gov; Website: [http:// dhaka.usembassy.gov](http://dhaka.usembassy.gov)*